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The Suspended Crossing (*śaṅkupatha*) in the Gorges of the Indus River as described by Chinese pilgrims Faxian, Dharmodgata and Xuanzang

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Abstract:

As the sixth article on Buddhist monk Faxian,¹ the present essay aims to supplement Chinese historical sources concerning the “suspended crossing” (*śaṅkupatha*) in the mountainous north of ancient India, which had been first discussed in paragraph §2.1-§2.4 of my 2011 article.² The complementary materials added here deal mainly with three aspects: (1) Corresponding to Faxian’s word *bàngtī* 傍梯 (pole-step), the paper discusses how Faxian’s direct successor Dharmodgata used *yì* 杙 (peg) to climb the rock on the bank of the Indus as recorded in the *Gaosengzhuan* 高僧傳 (§3). In this context, a complete English translation of Dharmodgata’s biography written by Huijiao is published here as appendix (§7). (2) The *śaṅkupatha* (peg-path) belonging to the *uttarapatha* (Northern route) was called *xuándù* 懸度 (suspended crossing) in Chinese historical records. This article tries to systematically analyze the Chinese sources in connection with the word *xuándù* such as in Daoxuan’s (596-667) *Shijia Fangzhi* 釋迦方志 and some other books (§4). Also personal observations by scholars who travelled to this area in the 20th century are added here. (3) In addition to Dharmodgata’s *yì*, Xuanzang (602-664) described in the *Datang Xiyuji* 大唐西域記 how he crossed the gorges of the Indus with help of the same technique (*zhuóyì* 槓杙: hitting-peg). Moreover, one description therein includes the word *bàng-yì* 傍杙 (pegs in a post) which is lexically similar to Faxian’s term *bàng-tī* 傍梯 (§5).

Keywords:

bàngtī 傍梯 (pole-step), *śaṅkupatha*, *xuándù* 懸度 (suspended crossing), Dharmodgata (Tanwujie 曇無竭 alias Fayong 法勇), *yì* 杙 (peg), Xuanzang 玄奘, *zhuóyì* 槓杙 (hitting-peg), *bàngyì* 傍杙 (pegs in a post)

§1. Preface: Another look at Faxian’s *bàngtī* 傍梯 (*śaṅkupatha*)

Having crossed large tracts of Central Asian desert and the Pamir plateau (蔥嶺), the Chinese pilgrims Faxian 法顯, Huijing 慧景, Daozheng 道整 and Huiying 慧應 found themselves

¹ In March 2017, the Wutaishan International Institute of Buddhist Studies and the University of British Columbia jointly held an international conference on the eminent Buddhist monk Faxian (4th-5th century) in Xiangyuan County, Shanxi Province, China. This paper arose from a report on exchanges during that conference with more recent findings included. I would like to thank the conference organizer, Prof. Chen Jinhua 陳金華 (Vancouver), for the kind invitation. The present English version has been largely translated by Jack Hargreaves (London) from an article written in Chinese, including numerous quotations from the original historical sources and Dharmodgata’s biography (§7). I sincerely thank Prof. Ji Yun 紀贇 (Singapore) who kindly organized the English translation as well as the editing of the proceedings of the above mentioned conference.

² See Hu-von Hinüber (胡海燕) 2011. For the Chinese translation of this paper, see 許尤娜 Hsue Yu-na (transl.), 法顯對天竺的認知:《佛國記》一些新詮釋 (Faxian dui Tianzhu de Renzhi: “Foguoji” yixie xin quanshi, in: *Yuan Kuang Journal of Buddhist Studies* 圓光學報, no. 23, Taiwan 2014, pp. 181–223. Both the English original and Chinese translation have been jointly reprinted in: Hu-von Hinüber 2017, pp. 85–183.

faced with traversing the Indus River between Toli (陀歷) and Udyāna (or Uḍḍiyāna, 烏菟). Considered alongside various other historical materials, Faxian's writings indicate that passage through the Pamir mountains brought the travelers immediately into the Northern part of the ancient Indian area (*Běi Tiānzhu* 北天竺).³ From there, Faxian and his party skirted the southern foot of the Pamir, heading southwest for the next 15 days, a route which saw them meet with extraordinary dangers. Located in what is now the northeastern mountainous region of present-day Pakistan, it fell within the territory of the ancient kingdom of Jibin 罽賓 (present southeast Afghanistan, northern Pakistan and northwestern Kashmir).⁴ At that time, it was an unavoidable route for those hoping to reach Northern Tianzhu (India). Following Faxian's example, and in his footsteps, Buddhist monks from Indian Chinese territories began a relationship of increased exchange via this area.

According to Faxian's *Foguoji*, perched atop the sharp banks of the Indus River (新頭河), Udyāna was only accessible by traversing the sheer cliff faces that lined the River. Here, "men of former times had bored into the stone to affix *bàngtī* (pole-steps) to secure a path, there are seven hundred (pole-steps) we had to overcome".⁵ As is discussed in my 2011 paper, multi-view research suggests that *bàngtī* 榜梯 is Faxian's choice of term for referring to Sanskrit *śaṅkupatha*. The first element of the compound phrase, *śaṅku* means "peg" or "awl." In ancient China, this kind of tool was also named *yì* 杙 as recorded by Dharmodgata (§3); sharpened to a point at one end, this "peg" could be inserted into the ground for tethering livestock and other animals. In Ancient India, *śaṅkus* were also used as a weapon or cutting tool. The second half of the phrase, *patha* means "road" or "path". Together, *śaṅkupatha* signifies a road or passage that cannot be traversed without the use of pegs. Arriving at such a road, the traveller would fix the pointed end of the *śaṅku* into the cliff face at ninety degrees to the surface, leaving a length of stick protruding from the wall onto which they could safely step. These pegs would support the whole weight of whoever was climbing the mountain (inclusive of their equipment and other baggage) above an open drop down the cliff side.

To safely negotiate such mountain roads required enormous skill and experience as well as a fair amount of physical strength and courage, and to some degree sounds like a fantastical — and near preposterous — endeavour to modern populations who are so used to living with advanced transportation and technology. Professional mountaineers might constitute the minority who find it both fascinating and impressive. But in previous ages, the ingenious *śaṅkupatha* was an economical and expedient method of movement and transport.

By supplementing my 2011 thesis with new material, this paper aims to evidence the equivalence of *yì* or *bàngyì* as named by Dharmodgata and Xuanzang, and the term *bàngtī* used by Faxian. Ultimately, the hope is to convince readers that all three terms are examples

3. "Across the mountains commenced Northern Tianzhu. As we advanced into the region, there was a small country named Toli", quoted from the *Foguoji* 佛國記 [A Record of Buddhist Kingdoms], see T51, 857c28–29: 度嶺已到北天竺。始入其境，有一小國名陀歷。In her 2005 article, the Japanese scholar H. Tsuchiya reported (p. 268b): "Going back to Fa Hsien, who wrote that he travelled from Pamir to Darel directly, we have already proposed that he must have travelled from Pamir, via Khora Bhort Pass, and through the Karambar Valley and Ishkoman Valley, to reach Gakuch on the Gilgit River."

4. With regard to the ancient kingdom of Jibin cf. Enomotos's article from 1994 "A Note on Kashmir as Referred to in Chinese Literature: Ji-bin". Cf. also Slaje 2019: 128-140. Concerning the current excavations in this area cf. the recent publications by the Italian Archaeological Mission in Pakistan (ACT Project), e.g. Meister and Olivieri 2015.

5. T51, 856a7–8: 昔人有鑿石通路施榜梯者，凡度七百。

of the earliest attempts to translate the Sanskrit *śaṅkupatha* into Chinese. My additions focus on the following three points:

(a) Eight years after Faxian's return to his home country, "having heard about Faxian and others trekking to the kingdoms of Buddha" (嘗聞法顯等躬踐佛國), Tanwujie 曇無竭 alias *Dharmodgata set out himself to follow the route originally taken by Faxian in his quest for Dharma. Corresponding to Faxian's word *bāngtī* 傍梯 (pole-step), Dharmodgata reported that he used *yì* 杙 (peg) to climb the rock on the bank of the Indus. In the *Gaosengzhuan* 高僧傳 [Biographies of Eminent Monks], Huijiao 慧皎 describes the daring and skill shown by Dharmodgata and his entourage when walking the rocky cliff faces of Northern Tianzhu (India): "Each man was equipped with four *yì* 杙. First, he retrieved the lower peg, then grasping the peg above him with his hand, lifted himself along the wall, repeating this over and over" (人各執四杙, 先拔下杙, 手攀上杙, 展轉相攀). Thus, Dharmodgata's description also corresponds to the Bhārhut relief depicting the *śaṅkupatha* and to lyrics of the Sanskrit poet Haribatta what I discussed in 2011 (see §3.2).

(b) The *śaṅkupatha* (peg-path) which belongs to the *uttarapatha* (Northern route) in ancient India, was called *xuándù* 懸度 ("suspended crossing") in Chinese historical records. In this article, I've systematically collected the Chinese sources in connection with the word *xuándù* such as in Daoxuan's (596-667) *Shijia Fangzhi* 釋迦方志 [Gazetteer of Buddhism] and some more books (§4). Also personal observations by scholars who travelled to this area in the 20th century are added here.

(c) In addition to Dharmodgata's *yì*, Xuanzang 玄奘 (602–664) wrote in the *Datang Xiyuji* 大唐西域記 [Records of the Western Regions of the Great Tang Empire] completed around two hundred years after Faxian's and Dharmodgata's lifetimes, of using the same technique (*zhuóyì* 槓杙: "hitting-peg") to cross the gorges of the Indus. Moreover, one description therein includes the word *bang-yì* 傍杙 (lit. pegs in a post) which is lexically similar to Faxian's term *bang-tī* 傍梯 (§5).

§2. Multi-view investigation of the Sanskrit term *śaṅkupatha* (peg-path)

In order to better compare Dharmodgata's and Xuanzang's accounts with those of Faxian, my 2011 thesis is summarised below according to four choice elements: the original *Foguoji* text (§2.1), *śaṅkupatha* as attested in Sanskrit grammar (§2.2), the Bhārhut relief depicting the *śaṅkupatha* and Haribatta's description can be additionally confirmed by Dharmodgata's experience (§3.2),⁶ and some supplementary material concerning *xuándù* 懸度 (suspended crossing) found in Chinese historical records is included in this study (§4).

§2.1. Relevant passages in the *Foguoji*

Up until 2011, the research consensus with regard the significance of *bāngtī* in the *Foguoji* remained consistently ambiguous at best, with most scholars interpreting it to indicate a "stone step" that was cut into a steep precipice using mining techniques.

Across the mountains commenced Northern Tianzhu... Following the Congling Mountains

⁶ For the sources of §2.1–§2.2 and §3.2 please see Hu-von Hinüber 2011: 224–231. My apologies for not listing all of them in detail here.

southwest for fifteen days, we took a challenging and precarious path by sharp slopes and drops. The terrain was only rock with a steep cliff wall 10,000 cubits across. Approaching the edge to look out sent my head spinning; if we hoped to traverse it, there was no place to put our feet. Below was the river named Xintou (Indus). Men of former times had bored into the stone to affix *bàngtī* 傍梯 [or pole-steps] to secure a path, there are seven hundred (steps) we had to overcome. After traversing the steps, we had to walk on tiptoes along a suspended rope to cross the river. From bank to bank was nearly eighty double steps. According to all reports (*jiuyi* 九譯, lit. nine translations], neither Zhang Qian 張騫 nor Gan Ying 甘英 of the Han Dynasty made it this far.⁷

To an extent, the scholars' misunderstanding can be attributed to uncertainty as to the specific meaning of “*zaoshi tonglu*” 凿石通路 — “bored into the stone to secure a path”. Certain scholars have skimmed over this detail in the past, neglecting to give it proper attention, while Japanese scholars have simply chosen not to translate the phrase at all, opting instead to directly use the Chinese. In my opinion, although the phrase *bàngtī* consists of only two characters, it is a potential source of many valuable insights about the contemporary culture. Specifically, more detailed investigation of the term has revealed two reasons why the question of its meaning is so much more complex than previously considered.

(a) Without the means for blasting rock yet invented, to cut away the rock from a steep precipice so as to install steps would have been required an inconceivably enormous construction effort, of which not a single record from relevant ancient documents about Northern Tianzhu (India) has been found to report. Therefore, it is highly unlikely that Faxian's *bàngtī* 傍梯 refers to steps cut or dug into the cliff face. Moreover, the original meaning of the second character *tī* 梯 was “a spot where one places one's feet”, or a “foothold”, and not at all what we associate with steps or ladders in modern vernacular.

(b) It took Faxian six years before he finally arrived in central India, a journey which saw him take innumerable treacherous paths. In the whole of the *Foguoji*, which is a book celebrated for its concise style, the only road that Faxian describes is the one in question. It can be assumed then that if the *bàngtī* were not an unusual means of passage, Faxian would not have wasted his ink writing about it. Moreover, for him to have include such precise detail as the number of steps - “seven hundred” to be exact - betrays, perhaps unintentionally, Faxian's terror at having to traverse the long passage, a terror so great that many years later when he recalled the experience, still his “heart raced and he started sweating”.⁸

§2.2. Sanskrit grammar and *śaṅkupatha* in its commentaries⁹

The *śaṅkupatha* alias *bàngtī* was, according to Faxian, built by “men of former times [who]

⁷ T51,857c28-858a10: 度嶺已到北天竺。、、、順嶺西南行十五日，其道艱阻、崖岸嶮絕。其山唯石，壁立千仞，臨之目眩，欲進則投足無所下。有水名新頭河。昔人有鑿石通路施傍梯者，凡度七百。度梯已，躡懸絙過河。河兩岸相去減八十步。九譯所記，漢之張騫、甘英皆不至此。

⁸ See Hu-von Hinüber 2013: 310: 自云：顧尋所經，不覺心動汗流。所以乘危履險、不惜此形者，蓋是志有所存、專其愚直，故投命於必死之地，以達萬一之冀 (T51, 866b27–29): “(After his additional stories Faxian) himself said: (still today,) when I look back at passed adventures, my heart involuntarily beats faster and I sweat laces my forehead. Why did I encounter danger and rush into such an adventure without regard for my own life? It must have been due to the fact that I had a definite goal in mind on which I was concentrating in an unflinching and almost monomaniacal way. That is why I exposed my life where death seemed inevitable in the hope that I could be the only one of ten thousand who would survive.”

⁹ In the 2011 article, I briefly explained the philological background of the Sanskrit word *śaṅkupatha* (pp. 226–227 with notes 10–16). For ease understanding, some explanations are added here now.

had bored into the stone to affix *bangti* [or pole-steps] to secure a path” (昔人有鑿石通路施傍梯者). Likewise, Dharmodgata described that “the stone wall’s surface was covered with holes for pegs arranged in a systematic way” (石壁皆有故杙孔，處處相對, see §3). Given that these *bāṅgtī* or *yī* were built by former generations, it is sensible to scour records within Indian literature from before the 5th century for other instances of *śaṅkupatha*.

Despite India lacking a formal written language prior to Aśoka’s reign in the Mauryan Dynasty (3rd century BCE), thanks to the unique means of oral transmission developed by the Indo-Aryan peoples, a great number of the Vedic texts has been successfully conveyed from the 11th century BCE until today with an impeccable degree of accuracy. Buddhism from 5th century BCE also possessed a similar oral tradition that was used to transmit knowledge, as did the Sanskrit grammatical system of the same era. It is as a result of India’s unique cultural formation that the country’s most valuable legacies have been preserved using oral means.

There are two Indian grammarians who did interpret the Sanskrit term *śaṅkupatha* in the 3rd and 2nd centuries BCE. By then the knowledge of Sanskrit used in authoritative texts had long been preserved via an unprecedented three-tiered system of review, namely, the Pāṇini’s Sūtra is followed by Kātyāyana’s *Vārttika* (elaboration) which again is followed by Patañjali’s *Bhāṣya* (commentary). Below is a brief outline of the system’s development centered on three principal grammar treatises that were completed chronologically:

- (a) The father of Sanskrit grammar was Pāṇini who lived sometime during the fifth and fourth centuries BCE. His grammar is called *Aṣṭādhyāyī*, hence the text’s alternate name of the *Pāṇini-sūtra*.¹⁰
- (b) Approximately in the third century BCE, another grammarian named Kātyāyana produced a *Vārttika*, or elaboration, on Pāṇini’s grammar.
- (c) The above two books, however, are only conserved as quotations within the *Vyākaraṇa-Mahābhāṣya*, or the *Mahābhāṣya* for short, completed in second century BCE by Patañjali.

The *Pāṇinisūtra*, chapter 5, section 1, line 77 reads “*uttarapathēnāhṛtam ca*,”¹¹ which refers to “[goods brought via the Northern Route] a word which can be used by analogy to construct other words.” This succinct expression attests to a system of word-building for nouns:

- (a) Here, the meaning in Sanskrit “something brought via the Northern route” expressed with the noun *āhṛtam* combined with the instrumental case *uttarapathena* can also be uttered by forming the noun *uttarapathikam*. The grammatical rule in this case requires that the initial simple vowel “u-” (zero grade) should be replaced by its Vṛddhi vowel “au-” (lengthened grade). In addition, the nominalizing suffix “-ika” is to be attached to the end of the word. In this way, a noun can be constructed in the neuter.¹²
- (b) Following the same rule, the meaning in Sanskrit “someone who travels via the northern route” can be directly expressed with the noun *uttarapathikah*. This construction also requires

¹⁰ The term *sūtra* in the *Pāṇinisūtra*’s title indicates a specific genre of ancient Indian text that typically comprises a condensed manual of “aphoristic scripture.” In less than four thousand lines, the *Pāṇinisūtra* covers the whole of Sanskrit grammar. Originally, *Jing* 經 in *Fojing* 佛經 meaning Buddhist Sūtra, also has this meaning, for an early text referred to as a *sūtra* typically had to follow a fixed form and contain a specific type of content.

¹¹ Regarding the *uttarapatha* (Northern routes) cf. Neelis 2011: 183f.

¹² The nouns in question are constructed according to the traditional Sanskrit word-building system named *ṭhañ*, cf. Böhtlingk, *Pāṇini’s Grammatik*, 1887: 166b.

that we replace the weak grade vowel of “*u-*” at the start of the word with the protracted “*au-*” vowel and attach the nominalizing suffix “*-ika*” so as to complete the masculine noun form.

The *Mahābhāṣya* by Patañjali (2nd century BCE) indicates that Kātyāyana, the commentator of Pāṇini’s grammar who approximately had lived a century after his predecessor, expanded on “via the Northern route” *uttarapathena* with the instrumental dual *ajapathaśaṅkupathābhyām ca* which means “via both the goat- and the peg-path as well” (i.e. from both these words nouns can also be formed). In this grammar example, Kātyāyana identified “the Northern route” with two types of paths that were unique to the Northern mountains: *ajapatha* or a goat-path,¹³ and *śaṅkupathā*, or a peg-path. Another century later, Patañjali, the synthesizing commentator of the Sanskrit grammar and the author of the *Mahābhāṣya*, succeeded to explain Kātyāyana’s above examples more comprehensible:¹⁴

(Here, with regards to Kātyāyana’s supplement), the following should be taught: “(goods brought) via both the goat- and the peg-path; both these words can be used by analogy to construct (the corresponding noun).”

“To go via the goat-path” can be expressed as *ājapathikaḥ*.¹⁵ “Goods brought via the goat-path” can be expressed as *ājapathikam*.¹⁶

“To go via the peg-path” can be expressed as *śaṅkupathikaḥ*.¹⁷ “Goods brought via the peg-path” can be expressed as *śaṅkupathikam*.¹⁸

Typically, grammarians avoid using rare or anachronistic terms in their examples, preferring to quote actively used vocabulary. Therefore, it can be assumed that the terms cited above, such as *śaṅkupatha*, not only existed already in Ancient India, but were in common usage, especially in the mountains of Northern regions. This clarification allows us to more accurately assess the link between the landscape and the language used to describe it. In this regard, Pāṇini’s birthplace is also of interest to our discussion of *śaṅkupatha*; according to Xuanzang e.g.,¹⁹ Pāṇini was born in Śālātura, the Northern mountain region of what is present-day Pakistan and an unavoidable passage in monks’ progress west to search for

¹³. For further information on *aja-patha* or goat-path and *vetra-patha* or wood-pole-path, see my 2011 article, p. 227 with reference Keilhorn 1996 (1883) and Haebler 1997; it is unnecessary to include them here.

¹⁴. *ajapathaśaṅkupathābhyām ceti vaktavyam. ajapathena gacchaty ājapathikaḥ. ajapathenāhṛtaṃ ājapathikam. śaṅkupathena gacchati śaṅkupathikaḥ. śaṅkupathenāhṛtaṃ śaṅkupathikam*, quoted from Kielhorn & Abhyankar (ed.), *The Vyākaraṇa-Mahābhāṣya of Patañjali*, II, 359.

¹⁵. Author’s note: a masculine noun that means “somebody who takes a goat-path”, for which the grammar rule dictates that the initial strengthened gradation vowel of “*a-*” (Guṇa) is replaced with the protracted “*ā-*” (Vṛddhi) as well the nominalising suffix “*-ika*” is added.

¹⁶. Author’s note: a neuter noun that means “something which has been transported via a goat-path”, for which the grammar rule dictates that the initial strengthened gradation vowel of “*a-*” is replaced with the protracted “*ā-*” as well the nominalising suffix “*-ika*” is added.

¹⁷. Author’s note: a masculine noun that means “somebody who takes a peg-path”, for which the grammar rule dictates that the initial strengthened gradation vowel of “*a-*” is replaced with the protracted “*ā-*” as well the nominalising suffix “*-ika*” is added.

¹⁸. Author’s note: a neuter noun that means “something which has been transported via a peg-path”, for which the grammar rule dictates that the initial strengthened gradation vowel of “*a-*” is replaced with the protracted “*ā-*” as well the nominalising suffix “*-ika*” is added.

¹⁹. Cf. Jin Kemu 金克木 1995: 1–2.

§3. On Dharmodgata (Tanwujie 曇無竭), Faxian's direct successor

After returning to Han territory, Faxian set about writing the *Foguoji*. In the year 414, when the book was completed, its reception was one of widespread shock and awe. It is through this text that, a mere six years later, the Chinese monk Tanwujie 曇無竭 (*Dharmodgata)²⁰, “heard about Faxian and others trekking to the kingdoms of Buddha” (尝闻法显等躬践佛国) and deeply moved by their dedication “vowed to leave behind the life” (忘身之誓) to follow the example of Faxian.

In the first year of the Yongchu era of the Liu-Song reign (420) during the Northern and Southern dynasties, Dharmodgata and his fellow Śramaṇas, altogether twenty five of them, set out via the same route westward on a quest for Dharma. Only twenty-one years separated Faxian's and Dharmodgata's travels to India. It was while receiving the monk ordination (*upasampadā*) in India that Fayong was bestowed his Buddhist name of Tanwujie 曇無竭 or *Dharmodgata in Sanskrit by Master Buddhahadra 佛馱多羅.

In Huijiao's 慧皎 (approx. 497–554) “Collected Biographies of Eminent Monks” (*Gaosengzhuan* 高僧傳), Dharmodgata sits immediately after Faxian.²¹ By comparison with all other biographies of Dharmodgata to which we still have access today, such as Sengyou's 僧祐 *Chusanjang Jiji*,²² Fei Zhangfang's 費長房 *Lidai Sanbaoji*,²³ and Zhi Pan's 志磐 *Fozu Tongji*²⁴ from the Southern Song Dynasty, Huijiao's recording indubitably is the most

²⁰ Or Dharmakṣama alias Fayong 法勇; for the full text of Dharmodgata's biography see appendix in §7.

²¹ See T50, 337b9–12: *Juan* three of the *Gaosengzhuan* 高僧傳, written by Śramaṇa Huijiao of Jiaxiang Monastery 嘉祥寺 in Huiji 會稽 during the Liang Dynasty; in the second part of the section *Yijing* 譯經 [Translated Scripture]: Faxian I, Tanwujie (Dharmodgata) II. Also, see 419b24–26, in the second part of the section about 13 translators: by Faxian of Xin Monastery 辛寺 in Jiangling 江陵 during the (Liu-)Song Dynasty (420–479), and by Tanwujie (Dharmodgata) from Huanglong 黃龍 during the (Liu-)Song Dynasty.

²² 出三藏記集 [Records on the Collected Texts in the Tripiṭaka], see T55, 12a28-b2: “The *Guanshiyin-Shoujijing* (*Avalokiteśvara-Vyākaraṇa-Sūtra), one *juan*. There is another version of this Sūtra (of Avalokiteśvara's Prediction) which also contains one *juan*. During the reign of Emperor Wu of Liu-Song (363–422), Śramaṇa Dharmodgata from Huanglong travelled west (to India) and returned with this Sūtra before translating it”; Original: 觀世音授記經一卷。右一部，凡一卷。宋武帝時，黃龍國沙門曇無竭。遊西域譯。

²³ 歷代三寶紀 [Records of the Three Treasures Throughout the Successive Dynasties], see T49, 92c12–19: “The *Guanshiyin-Pusa Shoujijing* 觀世音菩薩授記經 [Sūtra of Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara's Prediction], one *juan*. Second translation of this text. Slightly different from the Dharmarakṣa's translation during the Jin Dynasty. In the *Waiguozhuan* 外國傳 [Records of Foreign Kingdoms] consisting of five *juan*, Dharmodgata's journey west is recorded. Both these texts together total six *juan*. In the first year of the Yongchu era during Emperor Wu's reign, Śramaṇa Dharmodgata from Huanglong, whose Chinese name was Fayong, gathered twenty-five brother monks including Shi Sengmeng 僧猛 and set out toward the western regions for twenty years with them. Everyone else stayed abroad or died. When only Dharmodgata returned home, he brought this Sanskrit Sūtra which he copied in Jibin. In the final year of the Yuanjia era, he arrived in Jiangzuo and immediately translated the text in capital Yang(zhou). See the records by Wang Song, Sengyou, Huijiao, Li Kuo, Fashang, and others, saying that he (Dharmodgata) wrote a travel report consisting of five *juans*”; Original: 觀世音菩薩授記經一卷，第二出，與晉世竺法護譯者小異。外國傳五卷，竭自遊西域事。右二部合六卷。武帝世永初元年，黃龍國沙門曇無竭，宋言法勇，招集同志釋僧猛等二十五人，共遊西域二十餘年。自外並化，唯竭隻還。於罽賓國寫得前件梵本經來。元嘉末年達于江左，即於揚都自宣譯出。見王宋、僧祐、慧皎、李廓、法上等錄，白：著行記五卷。

²⁴ 佛祖統紀 [Chronological Record of the Buddhas and Patriarchs], see T49, 344a13–15: “Śramaṇa Dharmodgata from Huanglong and twenty-five monks including Sengmeng travelled to the western heavens (i.e. India) together in search of Buddhist scripture for more than twenty years. Only Dharmodgata returned to

detailed. Despite being short, Dharmodgata's biography is an invaluable source of information about the culture of eminent monks during the Eastern Jin Dynasty.

§3.1. Dharmodgata's use of *yì* 杙 (*śaṅku*)

Following Faxian's route to India as was intended from the beginning, Dharmodgata and his team, after "ascending to the Pamir plateau and crossing the snowy mountains," inevitably arrived at the *śaṅkupatha* for the next step of the journey. Dharmodgata used the Chinese word *yì* 杙 for rendering the Sanskrit *śaṅku*, which is a fitting interpretation both in terms of what it evokes visually and how accurately it corresponds to the original: *yì* is a small wooden peg or short wooden stick with a sharpened end very similar in shape to the Sanskrit *śaṅku*.²⁵

Dharmodgata provided a description how people used the *yì* (peg) to climb along a cliff wall: each person carried four pegs in their hands and to progress would first pull out the peg below them, then insert it into the hole previously cut out by former travelers, thus permitting them to navigate perilous and challenging cliff faces one peg at a time.

After three days travel, we had to traverse the great snow mountain. The cliff faces rose vertically around them and there was nowhere for their feet to find solid purchase. The stone wall's surface was covered with holes for pegs arranged by former (travelers) in a systematic way. Each man was equipped with four pegs (*yì*). First, he retrieved the lower peg, then grasping the peg above him with his hand, lifted himself along the wall, repeating this over and over. It took a whole day to cross this section when our feet finally returned to flat ground and we waited for the others to arrive so as to count our numbers: twelve of our group had perished (see §7 for more details).

Dharmodgata's words are particularly valuable too in helping us to understand the multitude finer details in the above quoted passage from the *Foguoji* (§2.1):

(a) Both explanations as to why Faxian and Dharmodgata were forced to cross the peg-path, in order to advance, center around the same idea: along the steep precipice, there was nowhere to place their feet. Faxian worded this: "The terrain was only rock with a steep cliff wall 1000 *ren* 仞 across. Approaching the edge to look out sent my head spinning; if we hoped to traverse it, there was no place to put our feet". Whereas Dharmodgata wrote: "The cliff faces rose vertically around us and there was nowhere for our feet to find solid purchase".

(b) Both indicated too that the peg-path on their journey west had been already installed by people before them when they arrived, likely the local people of Northern Tianzhu (India). Faxian said that "men of former times had bored into the stone to affix *bàngtī* (pole-steps) to secure a path". While Dharmodgata wrote that "the stone wall's surface was covered with old holes for pegs (*yì*)."

(c) This dangerous "peg-path" was by no means short, as Faxian emphasized by pointing out the

capital Yang(zhou) and translated the Sūtras (brought back)"; Original: 黃龍國沙門曇無竭與僧猛等二十五人，往西天求經越二十年。唯無竭還揚都譯經。

²⁵ In the early fifth century, it is possible that the *yì* (pegs) used for climbing rock faces were made of metal. For example, Haribhṭa mentions iron pegs (§3.2). However, compared with wooden pegs, the extra weight involved with carrying four metal pegs will have been considerable. It is important to note that Xuanzang's seventh century record wrote *yì* 杙 and *zhuóyì* 橛杙 (§5) using the radical for wood 木.

“seven hundred steps”. As one can probably imagine, traversing a cliff face across so many these peg-steps, each as dangerous as the last, was a time-consuming challenge. Dharmodgata confirms that it “took a whole day to cross this section when [his] feet finally returned to flat ground” — a mention of time which is absent in the *Foguoji*. Together, the monks’ accounts paint a complete picture of the daring journey, Faxian providing the number of *bàngtī* (peg-steps) crossed and Dharmodgata the necessary time for crossing them.

(d) Faxian, Huijing, Daozheng and Huiying apparently did not lose a member of their team at this stage and whether they received assistance from the local inhabitants is unknown. By contrast, Dharmodgata and his team of twenty five suffered heavy sacrifices, with their numbers cut in half by the time they made the other side.

Although Huijiao never includes Faxian’s term *bàngtī* in the *Gaosengzhuan*, opting instead to adopt Fayong’s (Dharmodgata’s) practical translation of *yì*, he does place the two monks side by side for ease of comparison:

I believe the true Dharma is profound and vast, uncontainable even by eight hundred million (letters). Yet the scriptures we have acquired through translation so far number barely more than a thousand volumes. These are works retrieved by transcending desert boundaries and surpassing great dangers. Climbing over perilous routes when the smoke (fired by the locals) was seen (as a signal for traversal) or relying on pegs (*yì*) to continue forward. When they finally met again at the destination and counted their number, then usually eight to nine persons out of ten companions lost their lives. This is why Faxian, Zhimeng, Zhiyan, Fayong and others finally returned home all alone although each of them did form a retinue with many companions on departure. What a dreadful circumstance! So it should be known that every sacred scripture retrieved in this country had in fact been paid for with the lives (of Buddhist monks).²⁶

§3.2. The Bhārhut relief and Haribaṭṭa’s poem concerning *saṅkupatha*

Ancient Indian archaeological findings are all indispensable disciplines in the pursuit of a comprehensive history of early Buddhism. Only by combining these fields can textual and pictorial materials be accurately connected. So, if once more we look back at the relief carving upon the stūpa’s railing in Bhārhut, we will realize that the scene discussed in 2011²⁷ is highly reminiscent of this account by Dharmodgata.

The stūpa in Bhārhut, central India is surrounded by railings which bear-exquisite reliefs carving dating from the second or third century BCE. One of the sculpted representations shows two men who are each holding four pegs in their hands and climbing a cliff face. Both men’s feet are also supported on pegs, as is described by Xuanzang as “stepping across the pegs hit (into the wall)” (椓杙躡蹬, see §5.1).

Likewise, Dharmodgata’s description discussed above seems to accurately capture the scene depicted by the carving as well: “Each man was equipped with four pegs (*yì*). First, he retrieved the lowest peg, then grasping the peg above him with his hand, lifted himself along

²⁶ T50, 346a10–15: 竊惟正法淵廣，數盈八億。傳譯所得，卷止千餘。皆由踰越沙阻，履跨危絕。或望烟渡險，或附杙前身，及相會推求，莫不十遺八九。是以法顯、智猛、智嚴、法勇等，發趾則結旅成群，還至則顧影唯一，實足傷哉！當知一經達此，豈非更賜壽命。

²⁷ See Hu-von Hinüber 2011: 228–230 with figures 1-3.

the wall, repeating this over and over” (§3). The two men in the image, likely of the forest- and mountain-dwelling Śabara people,²⁸ are wearing “clothing” made of leaves. Upon the backs of these *śāṅkupathikah*, or “people who take a peg-path”, are baskets that contain an unknown cargo, which Patañjali would have identified as *śāṅkupathikam*, or “something which has been transported via a peg-path”.



Similarly, Dharmodgata’s above account also corresponds word by word with a verse of the Sanskrit poet Haribhaṭṭa. At the beginning of the fifth century, Haribhaṭṭa, a contemporary of Faxian and Dharmodgata, refashioned the stories of the Buddha’s lives into his own telling using the popular title *Jātakamālā*. In one piece, the poet from Jibin (Kashmir) describes how the prince Sudhana used *śaṅku* to climb a precipice:

“With a heavy hammer, he drove on the iron peg again and again, in order to fix it one yard deep into the mountain face. And after he climbed on this peg, he hammered in another peg. He then stood on this one and pulled out the peg below”.²⁹

§3.3. The description of *śaṅkupatha* by A. Stein and K. Jettmar

It seems that this technique had been still practiced by the locals until the forties of the last century, when it came to climbing a cliff face with pegs and boring peg holes into the rock. The report written by Sir Aurel Stein (1942: 55) who conducted fieldwork in this area, agrees exactly with Dharmodgata’s and Haribhaṭṭa’s description:

When this was being made the men had often to be suspended from pegs while they were at work boring holes to blast the rock or to fix in fissures the tree branches which were to support galleries.

In 1987, after conducting a site survey in Northern areas of Pakistan, Karl Jettmar, an ethnologist at the Heidelberg University, wrote a report “The Suspended Crossing: Where and Why?” Jettmar’s description agrees with the records of Faxian and Dharmodgata:

Diplomatic missions, merchants, and Buddhist pilgrims had the option to choose a time-saving but dangerous way to shorten the process. They could use the only permanent open connection between the Transhimalayan zone and the south, namely the Suspended Crossing. ...When this footpath was used by peddlers coming from the north, they had to leave the bank of the Indus between Shatial and Sazin and climb up to a place near the village of Sazin, approximately 300 meters higher than the bottom of the Indus valley. There a group of stone slabs marked the beginning of the most dangerous part of the track. It was practicable only because tree branches had been fixed in fissures on the rock supporting galleries, steps had been carved out, in many places there were logs with notches to be used as ladders.

²⁸ Identified by Monika Zin in 2008 who also drew the figure attached here (Fig. 33.19).

²⁹ Quoted from Straube 2006 (HJM25.177f.): *tatra bhūbhṛty ayaḥśaṅkum mudgareṇa garīyasā, kiṣkumātre sthīrikartum ājaghāna punaḥ punaḥ. tam ca kīlakam āruhya sa jaghānāparam punaḥ, sthītvā tatra ca tam kīlam adhastād udapāṭayat.*

§4. The “Suspended Crossing” (*xuándù* 懸度) as described in Chinese historical records

The *śaṅkupatha* (peg-path) belonging to the *uttarapatha* (Northern route) was called *xuándù* 懸度 (lit. “suspended crossing” or “hanging passage”) in Chinese historical records. This paragraph serves to systematically collect the Chinese sources with regard to the word *xuándù* which can be found aplenty in historical documents.

In the above extract from the *Foguoji*, Faxian emphasizes that neither Zhang Qian 張騫 (164–114 BCE) as an imperial envoy for the Western Han emperor³⁰ nor Gan Ying 甘英 (1st century CE) as a posted diplomat during the Eastern Han Dynasty ever travelled to Northern Tianzhu (India) at the southern foot of the Pamir plateau.³¹ However, Faxian seems to have known that a few decades before Gan Ying's mission, someone had already reached there (Jibin 罽賓) over the notorious *xuándù* 懸度: that is the emissary Cai Yin 蔡愔 of Eastern Han Emperor Ming.

Current evidence I have found shows that the earliest crossing of the “hanging passage” *xuándù* heading into Northern Tianzhu (India) was probably completed by imperial envoy Cai Yin and his team sent by the Emperor Ming 漢明帝 in the third year of the Yongping era (60 CE) of the Eastern Han Dynasty. In the *Shijia Fangzhi* 釋迦方志 [Gazetteer of Buddhism], Xuanzang's contemporary Master Daoxuan 道宣 (596–667) recorded that after being visited in a dream by a golden image of a man, Emperor Ming of Han dispatched Cai Yin and a retinue to “cross the hanging passage (located) on the southern side of the snowy mountain” (從雪山南頭懸度道) and enter India (Tianzhu) to search for the image of the Buddha and to appeal for the Buddhist teachings. Cai Yin returned to Luoyang in the tenth year of the Yongping era (67 CE) with Kāśyapa Mātāṅga (迦葉摩騰) and Dharmaratna (竺法蘭) at his side, for this occasion the emperor ordered White-Horse-Temple 白馬寺 be built:

In the Later Han, year three of the Yongping era, Emperor Ming alias Xianzong dreamed of a golden figure over three meters (*zhang*) tall, the light of the sun and moon around his neck, who flew up to the [emperor's] palace. (In the morning,) the emperor asked his officials and advisors (what the dream meant), to which the learned (court scribe and astrologer) Fu Yi replied: Your subject has heard that there is a divine figure in the Western Regions who is named Buddha. Your majesty must have dreamt of him. The Emperor thus dispatched the senior official Cai Yin and the court academician Qin Jing among others to cross the hanging passage (located) on the southern side of the snowy mountain to arrive in India (Tianzhu) and search for Buddhist Dharma by finding that image [from his dream]. When they returned with the Śramaṇas Kāśyapa Mātāṅga and Dharmaratna, they followed by the original route back all the way to Luoyang.³²

Ban Gu 班固 (32–93) included a chapter about Jibin in section 66 of the tales of the Western Regions within the *Hanshu* 漢書 [Book of Han]. He describes the intimidating “Sus-

³⁰. As an imperial envoy for the Western Han emperor, Zhang Qian was sent to Central and Western Asia with an entourage of more than 100 people in the year 139 BCE.

³¹. Gan Ying's diplomatic mission was assigned to him by the Protector-general of the Western Regions, Ban Chao 班超 (32–102 CE). The mission, started in the ninth year of the Yongyuan era of the Eastern Han Dynasty (97 CE), eventually took Gan Ying to Daqin 大秦 which was the ancient Chinese name for the Roman Empire, specifically its territories in Western Asia.

³². T51, 969a14–20: 後漢顯宗孝明皇帝，永平三年夜夢金人，身長丈餘，項佩日月光，飛行殿前。帝問群臣，通人傅毅曰：臣聞西域有神其名曰佛，陛下所夢將必是乎。帝乃遣郎中蔡愔博士秦景等，從雪山南頭懸度道，入到天竺，圖其形像尋訪佛法。將沙門迦葉摩騰、竺法蘭等還，尋舊路而屆雒陽。

pended Crossing” (*xuándù* 懸度) therein:

In addition, they pass over the ranges [known as hills of the] Greater and the Lesser Headache, and the slopes of the Red Earth and the Fever of the Body. These cause a man to suffer fever; he has no colour, his head aches and he vomits; asses and stock animals all suffer in this way. Furthermore there are the Three Pools and the Great Rock Slopes, with a path that is a foot and six or seven inches wide, but leads forward for a length of thirty li, overlooking a precipice whose depth is unfathomed. Travellers passing on horse or foot hold on to one another and pull each other along with ropes; and only after a journey of more than two thousand *li* do they reach the Suspended Crossing. When animals fall, before they have dropped half-way down the chasm they are shattered in pieces, and when men fall, the situation is such that they are unable to rescue one another. The danger of these precipices beggars description.³³

Again in the *Shijia Fangzhi*, Daoxuan recorded a similar event during the final year of the Northern Wei Emperor Taiwu’s reign (452), when Śramaṇa Daoyao 道藥 travelled along the ancient road equipped by the kingdom *Sule* 疎勒 (with Kašgar as its capital) and then crossed that hanging passage (*xuándù* 懸度) to arrive at Saṃkāśya (*Sengjiashi-guo* 僧伽施國) which was located in the Ganges region of Central India. Later, he set out from there to retrace his earlier route homeward:

In the last year of the reign of (Emperor) Taiwu during the Later (i.e. Northern) Wei (452), the Śramaṇa Daoyao entered the hanging passage from the *Sule* road and arrived at Saṃkāśya before returning by following his former way. He recorded this in a one-fascicle account.³⁴

In the first year of the Shengui 神龜 era of Northern Wei Emperor Xiaoming’s reign (518), Empress Dowager Hu sent Bhikṣu Huisheng 惠生 of Luoyang’s Chongli Monastery (崇立寺) together with Song Yun 宋雲 of Dunhuang to the Western Regions to retrieve Buddhist literature. According to the *Beiwei Seng Huisheng Shixiyuji* 北魏僧惠生使西域記 [Record of Monk Huisheng’s Travel to the Western Regions in the Northern Wei Dynasty], having traversed the Pamir mountains, Huisheng and his retinue succeeded in crossing the “hanging passage” (*xuándù* 懸度) so as to reach Udyāna (*Wuchang-guo* 烏場國).³⁵

Gradually leaving Congling (Pamir), the road which is all hard and full of sharp stone becomes threateningly dangerous, and so steep that only one man or one horse alone can pass through. The

³³. This translation is taken from Hulsewé & Loewe 1979:110f. For the Chinese original see *Hanshu* 漢書 [Book of Han], edition of the Zhonghua Shuju 中華書局 (Hong Kong 1970), p. 3887 (*juan* 12): 又歷大頭痛、小頭痛之山，赤土身熱之阪，令人身熱無色，頭痛嘔吐，驢畜盡然。又有三池磐石阪，道陟者尺六七寸，長者徑三十里。臨崢嶸不測之深，行者騎步相持，繩索相引，二千余里乃到懸度。畜隊，未半阬谷盡靡碎；人墮，勢不得相收視。險阻危害，不可勝言。

³⁴. T51, 969c4–6: 後魏太武末年，沙門道藥從疎勒道入經懸度到僧伽施國。及返還尋故道，著傳一卷。 In the *Guanghongmingji* 廣弘明集 [The Enlarged Collection of Essays on the Expansion and Elucidation of Buddhism], Daoxuan explains the meaning of *xuandu* 懸度, emphasizing that it should not be confused with *xiandu* 賢豆, *shendu* 身毒 or *tiandu* 天毒: “*Xuandu*, hanging passages, is a dangerous path in Northern Tianzhu, one walks across chains to cross that”; for the Chinese original see T52, 129b5–6: 尋夫懸度乃北天之險地，乘索而度也。 The potential for misunderstanding here not only lies in the closeness of pronunciation but may also come from the fact that taking the “*xuandu*”, or the hanging passage, was necessary for crossing the “*shendu*” river (Indus) into the kingdom of “*shendu*” (India).

³⁵. Recently, Harry Falk also discussed the term *xuándù* 懸度 in his article “The Five Yabghus of the Yuezhi” (2018), see esp. pp. 28–31: Further Use of the Shangmi Route: a) Song Yun.

ground under iron chains and hanging passage is beyond one's sight. During the first third of the twelfth month, they entered the kingdom of Udyāna which in the north borders the Pamir and in the south is connected with India. The climate is mild and the plateau fields fertile. It is highly populous and abundant of goods.³⁶

In terms of direction, the Huisheng's route was identical to that of Cai Yin (completing the round trip between 60–67 CE), Faxian (travelling toward Northern India in 401–402) and Dharmodgata (departing in 420). About two hundred years later, Xuanzang also followed that very same path. There is a variety of data to suggest that the so-called “suspended crossing” (*xuándù* 懸度) in fact include a whole gamut of dangerous corridors; taking all of them into consideration, the peg path (*śaṅkupatha*) undoubtedly belonged to the most perilous track. Xuanzang himself later stated that the diverse challenges included “sometimes walking rope bridges, sometimes climbing iron chains. Also, a plank path suspended over an open drop - that perilous flying bridge - required carefully stepping across the pegs hit [into the wall]” (see §5: 或覆繩索, 或牽鐵鎖, 棧道虛臨, 飛梁危構, 椽杙蹶蹶).³⁷

§ 5. *zhuóyì* 椽杙 and *bàngyì* 傍杙 in Xunzang's *Datang Xiyuji* 大唐西域記

In chapter (*juan*) three of the *Datang Xiyuji*, Xuanzang introduces a total of eight countries. The first among them is *Wuzhangna-guo* 烏仗那國 which is the very same country as the *Wuchang-guo* 烏菴國 described by Faxian - both refer to Udyāna. In this chapter, Xuanzang's own narrative of the mountain trails “which will be eschewed by travelers as soon as they got wind of those (notorious paths)” (行者望風謝路) is as follows:

³⁶ T51, 867a14–17: 漸出葱嶺, 磽角危峻, 人馬僅通。鐵鎖懸度, 下不見底。十二月初旬入烏場國, 北接葱嶺, 南連天竺, 土氣和暖, 原田膾膾, 民物殷阜。In *juan* five of the *Luoyang Qialanji* 洛陽伽藍記 [A Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang], completed in the middle of the sixth century, Yang Xuanzhi 楊街之 also recorded the journey that Song Yun 宋雲 and Huisheng 惠生 took to gather scripture: “The high road was extremely dangerous and barely accommodated one person and a horse. Between Paṭola Śāhi (*Bolule-guo* 鉢盧勒國) to Udyāna was a bridge of iron chains that hung over the river. The ground below was beyond our sight. Without anyone to hold on to at your side, you might fall 10,000 *ren* below. Consequently, all travellers eschewed (this route) as soon as they got wind of it. At the beginning of the twelfth month, they entered Udyāna which in the north borders the Congling (Pamir) and in the south is connected with Tianzhu (India). The climate is mild and there are several thousand villages. It is highly populous and abundant of goods”; for the Chinese original see T51, 1019c14–19: 峻路危道, 人馬僅通一直一道。從鉢盧勒國向烏場國, 鐵鎖爲橋, 縣虛爲渡。下不見底, 旁無挽捉, 倏忽之間投軀萬仞, 是以行者望風謝路耳。十二月初入烏場國。北接葱嶺, 南連天竺。土氣和暖, 地方數千, 民物殷阜。

³⁷ Xuanzang's disciple Huili 慧立, in his 688 book *Datang Daci'ensi Sanzangfashi Zhuan* 大唐大慈恩寺三藏法師傳 [A Biography of the Tripitaka-master of the Great Ci'en Monastery of the Great Tang Dynasty], also refers to his master Xuanzang's journey across the *xuándù* 懸度: “With a whole twenty years of resources for the return journey, (Xuanzang) admit that he felt inevitable unease at where to begin. Leaving the water source in Turfan there are hardly any damp areas (in the desert). Having climbed the Pamir Mountains, one is grateful to have overcome this difficult task. If you've survived the hazard of the suspended crossing, then there's no greater concern than this”; for the Chinese original see T50, 226a6–9: 令充二十年往還之資, 伏對驚慚不知啓處。決交河之水, 比澤非多。舉葱嶺之山, 方恩豈重。懸度陵溪之險, 不復爲憂; also: “During the Zhenguan era, India (Shendu) was converted to a good relationship (with Tang's China). The official calendar (of the Tang) has been posted there via the hot desert; India's state gifts were brought (to China) over the hanging passage. Communication and traffic (between both countries) became increasingly uniform; there were hardly any obstacles on the travel route. Śramaṇa Xuanzang set out leant on a monk's staff in search of the true Dharma, leaving via the Jade Gate (Yumen Pass), he persisted onward the Ambavana (at Rājagrha) and finally reached India”; for the Chinese original see T50, 258b19–22: 貞觀中年, 身毒歸化。越熱阪而領朔, 跨懸度以輪駝。文軌既同, 道路無擁。沙門玄奘, 振錫尋真。出自玉關, 長驅奈苑, 至于天竺。

Heading in the opposite direction to the Indus River's current, the road was hazardous, the valley deep. Sometimes walking rope bridges, sometimes climbing iron chains. There were also plank paths suspended over an open drop, flying pillars constructed in dangerous places, or hitting-pegs (see §5.1) which required carefully stepping. After walking one thousand *li*, we arrived at Darel Valley, the site of Udyāna's old capital city.³⁸

§5.1. *zhuóyì* 椽杙 or *chuányì* 椽杙

The key word in this passage is *chuányì* 椽杙 as printed in the Taishō and some other editions. Above we have already looked at the meaning of *yì* in our analysis of the Dharmodgata's biography by Huijiao. The focus of this section, therefore, is on the first character, *chuán* 椽, which essentially means “wood stick”. In the critical and annotated edition of the *Datang Xiyuji* published in 1985,³⁹ Ji Xianlin and other co-editors note that most editions of Xuanzang's record⁴⁰ and the edit by Xiang Da 向达 all use the character *zhuó* 槓 meaning “hit/hitting” instead. Despite this, Jiang Zhongxin who was responsible for the Indian section of the text still opted for *chuányì* 椽杙 in accordance with the *Huilin Yinyi* 慧琳音義,⁴¹ citing as his reason that “the meaning of *zhuó* 槓 is unsuitable, while ‘carefully stepping across *chuányì* 椽杙’ perfectly evokes the danger of navigating wooden planks as a path”.⁴² This choice of reading aligns with the cited passage from the Taishō edition 大正藏 too. However, given that the compound noun *chuányì* 椽杙 comprises two characters which mean the same, it can only be understood to signify one thing: “a (wood) stick peg”. This description by no means fits with the two verbs that follow it, *niè* 蹣 and *dēng* 蹬 (both meaning “step on”), not syntactically, nor in its significance.

Therefore, and on the basis of the varied research elucidated on thus far (§2-§4), I hold the opinion that *zhuóyì* 槓杙 is actually the correct word choice. The original meaning of *zhuó* 槓 is “beat” or “hit”, thus placed before *yì*, it serves as a verb to provide the meaning of “hitting the peg”, or more specifically, hitting a peg into the rock face. Consequently, once combined with *niè* 蹣 (meaning “to step on”) the complete phrase of *zhuó-yì niè-dēng* 槓杙蹣蹬 describes the exact scene that was depicted by Dharmodgata, Haribhaṭṭa and the Bhārhut carving: hitting pegs into the rock face, then stepping onto them to climb forward.

Here, it is also important that we emphasize the difference between climbing on pegs and climbing along a plank path “*zhàndào*” 棧道, which is another method entirely. It was in the two early Han Dynasty works the *Zhanguo ce* 戰國策 [Strategies of the Warring States] and *Shiji* 史記 [Records of the Grand Historian] that the word *zhàndào* first appeared, where it described the use of wooden planks installed horizontally on the rock face so as to form a

³⁸ T51, 884b6–9: 逆上信度河。途路危險，山谷杳冥。或覆繩索、或牽鐵鎖。棧道虛臨，飛梁危構，椽杙蹣蹬。行千餘里至達麗羅川，即烏仗那國舊都也。

³⁹ *Datang Xiyu Ji Jiaozhu* 大唐西域記校註 [Datang Xiyuji: Edited and Annotated edition], ed. by Ji Xianlin 季羨林 et al, Beijing (Zhonghua Shuju 中华书局) 1985.

⁴⁰ Namely, the Shi(shan Monastery) edition 石本, Song (Dynasty) edition 宋本, Zifu (Monastery) edition 資福本, Yuan (Dynasty) edition 元本, Mingnan (Tripiṭaka) edition 明南本, Jingshan (Tripiṭaka) edition 徑山本, Jinling (Sūtra Printing edition) 金陵本, and *Suihanlu* edition 隨函錄 (i.e. 新集藏經音義隨函錄: *New Collected Record of the Glossaries of Buddhist Sutras*).

⁴¹ This book “Pronunciation and Meaning explained by Huilin” is the second edition of the encyclopedia *Yiqiejing Yinyi* 《一切經音義》 by Huilin (737–820).

⁴² Cited from Ji Xianlin (ed.), *Datang Xiyuji Jiaozhu* 大唐西域記校註, p. 296, note 3: 按槓字義不合，‘椽杙蹣蹬’，正狀棧道架木之險。

level path. Although these planks were narrow and suspended above open drops, it was still possible to stand and walk across their flat surface in a relatively normal manner. The distinction between *zhàndào* 棧道 and *zhuóyì* 榑杙, therefore, is a significant one, and must be stressed. They are two different methods of climbing that may have had to be alternately used in certain areas. If Faxian, Dharmodgata, Xuanzang and other itinerant monks had only ever seen *zhàndào* along their journeys, then the already extant early Chinese term would have been sufficient and there would have been no need to resort to new terms like *bàngtī* 傍梯 or *yì* 杙 *yì* for their accounts.⁴³

In *Shijia Fangzhi*, Daoxuan even identifies *zhànlíang* 棧梁 (plank-bridge) and *suǒyì* 鎖杙 (lock-peg) as complementary techniques that were used together as an alternating system of climbing: “Heading in the opposite direction to the Indus River’s current, the way was hazardous. (They) climbed along suspended plank-bridges and carefully stepped across locked pegs. More than one thousand *li* later was Darel Valley, the former site of Udyāna’s capital city.”⁴⁴ The “locked pegs” (*suǒyì* 鎖杙) as mentioned by Daoxuan means nothing else than hitting pegs (*zhuóyì* 榑杙) into holes to firmly lock them in the wall.

§5.2. *bàngyì* 傍杙 used by Non-Buddhist ascetics

In chapter (*juan*) five of the *Datang Xiyuji*, Xuanzang uses the word *bàng-yì* 傍杙 (pegs in a post). Throughout his writings, this term is most similar to Faxian’s *bang-tī* 傍梯.

Six countries are described within that particular chapter, the fourth of which is *Boluonajia-guo* 鉢邏耶伽國, or Prayāga in Sanskrit, which means “the land of sacrifice”. It was in this country that Xuanzang encountered an extremely challenging *tapas* practice: before sunrise, tens of Non-Buddhist (lit. heretic) ascetics would cling to tall posts erected in the middle of a river, each using only one hand and one foot to secure themselves on *bàngyì* 傍杙 - the pegs protruding from their post. They would then stretch their free hand and foot out and with eyes wide open, stare at the sun throughout the whole day, following its trajectory by turning their neck to the right. This continued until sunset.

Once upon when King Harshavardhana offered mass alms, a macaque residing by the riverside has retreated alone beneath a tree and refused the food. Several days later the macaque starved to death. As a reaction, a number of ascetics of Non-Buddhist religions put themselves through a form of *tapas* that involved erecting tall posts in that river and climbing atop them when the sun was about to rise. With one hand they held onto the post head and one foot stood on a peg protruding from the post. The other hand and foot were extended out with nothing to support them. They didn’t bend their limbs at all. Stretching their necks, they gazed at the sun, turning to the right to keep their eyes on the sun as it moved. They only came down when dusk finally

⁴³. Of course, before finding the Sanskrit term *śaṅkupatha*, it was difficult to accurately grasp the eminent monks’ accounts using the Chinese alone. Nagasawa Kazutoshi 長澤和俊 attempted e.g. in his 1996 publication 《法顯伝訳註解説》 to use images of plank-paths in Nepal to explain *bangtī* 傍梯 (see Hu-von Hinüber 2011: 225, note 8 and 230, note 25). Both of my mentors, Prof. Ji Xianlin (1911–2009) and Prof. Jiang Zhongxin (1942–2002), while collating an edition of the *Datang Xiyuji* during the first year of China’s Reform and Opening, lacked materials and data for the work, therefore that they neglected to take into account Prof. Xiang Da’s (1900–1966) viewpoint is not at all surprising: Effective research and investigation requires a comprehensive look at all previous research and data around a question, else errors, of a single word or more, might arise.

⁴⁴. T51, 955c4–6 逆上信渡河，途路極險。乘縴棧梁、鎖杙躡躑。千有餘里至達麗羅川，烏仗那舊所都也。

arrived. Tens of practitioners underwent this ritual in the hope that such an asceticism would help them to transcend the cycle of life and death. Many of them have not rested a day for decades.⁴⁵

In this passage by Xuanzang, the phrase *niè-bàngyì* 躡傍杙 (“to step on a peg protruding from the post”) shares the same verb as the *zhuó-yì niè-dēng* 掬杙躡蹬 looked at earlier. Moreover, Xuanzang’s use of the term *bàngyì* serves to substantiate my proposed connection between *bàngyì* and *yì*. Not only was this form of *tapas* likely highly demanding on a person’s strength, more impressive than that is the stamina of focus that was needed, as with “stepping across pegs hit (into the wall)”, to not slip from the peg. The slightest lapse in concentration would have led to a fall. Such intense *tapas* practices are not favored by Buddhism, however, as someone familiar with the pursuit of liberation and the decades-long perseverance and untiring willpower that it requires, even Xuanzang was impressed by the unquestionable power on display.

§6. Some concluding remarks on the potential of future research

The *Foguoji*, despite being a short book relative to others of its ilk, abounds with historical materials about the ancient Silk Road. Two characters from its pages are all that have been covered by this paper: *bàng* 傍 and *tī* 梯. Four, at most, if we count Dharmodgata’s *yì* 杙 and Xuanzang’s *zhuóyì* 掬杙 (and *bàngyì* 傍杙). Yet, by way of exploring these characters alone, we have happened upon the earliest Chinese translation of the Sanskrit *śāṅkupatha*, deciphered the relief carving at Bhārhut, and now understand the previously perplexing line of poetry of Haribhaṭṭa.

From Cai Yin of the Han Dynasty until Faxian and Dharmodgata of the Eastern Jin, then from Xuanzang of the High Tang through until the Song, a history of one thousand years extending from the first century forward, innumerable Chinese monks in their search for the Dharma faced and conquered the “suspended crossing” in the gorges of the Indus. Exactly how many of these brave souls dared to use the : *bàngtī* 傍梯 or *yì* 杙 to navigate the cliff faces is difficult to estimate given the limited surviving materials, yet even what is left to us requires significant further research before we ever come close to exhausting the potential insights therein.

Different from the tradition of Theravāva and Tibetan Buddhism, the Tripiṭaka transmitted in Chinese has its own wealth of unique resources that still require to be looked at in depth, especially its “Section of Historical Records and Monk’s Biographies”⁴⁶ which lacks in all other traditions of Buddhist literature. Today, as the study of Buddhism becomes an ever more global pursuit, it has become necessary to conduct research on the invaluable Chinese Buddhist heritage via interdisciplinary, multi-view approaches. Looked at through this lens, the *Foguoji* alone contains endless new threads of investigation waiting to be picked up and questions to be answered, my article is nothing more than a single example among many potential future theses.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ T51, 897c19–27: 當戒日王之大施也，有一獼猴居河之濱，獨在樹下屏迹絕食，經數日後自餓而死。故諸外道修苦行者，於河中立高柱，日將旦也便即昇之。一手一足執柱端、躡傍杙。一手一足虛懸外申。臨空不屈，延頸張目，視日右轉，逮乎曛暮方乃下焉。若此者其徒數十，冀斯勤苦出離生死，或數十年未嘗懈怠。

⁴⁶ Shi-Zhuan-Bu 史傳部: no. 2026–2120 in vol. 49–52 of the Taishō edition.

⁴⁷ I would also like to thank Prof. Yang Yuchang 楊玉昌 of the Sun Yat-sen University and Prof. Harry Falk

§ 7. Appendix: The English Translation of Dharmodgata's Biography⁴⁸

Shi Tanwujie (釋曇無竭, Dharmodgata), who is named Fayong 法勇 here (in China). Surnamed Li, from Huanglong in Youzhou. A novice monk since young, he long cultivated himself via *tapas*, abiding by the precepts (Vinaya) and reciting scriptures (Sūtra). Consequently, his masters and the Samgha thought highly of him. When he heard Faxian and others trekking to the kingdoms of Buddha, awed, he vowed to leave behind his life (to repeat that journey). In the first year of the Liu Song Dynasty's Yongchu era (420 CE), he gathered a twenty-five-strong team of Śramāṇas, including Sengmeng 僧猛 and Tanlang 曇朗, and equipped with the tools, food and other supplies, they headed west, setting out from the north of the territory.

First, they arrived in the kingdom Henan⁴⁹, then passed through the commandery Haixi 海西郡⁵⁰ to continue onto the commandery Gaochang 高昌郡. Passing through such places as Kizil (Quici 龜茲) and Shale (Kashgar), they ascended Congling and crossed the Snowy Mountains. Along the route they travelled by one thousand *li* of poisonous miasma and ten thousand *li* of ice-covered glacier before reaching a mountain with a great river beneath it, rushing as fast as an arrow. To cross between two mountains, there was nothing more than a steel chain for a bridge over which a team of ten climbed to the other side and lit a fire to inform the others. On seeing the smoke, it was known that the first team successfully crossed the bridge and the remaining group carried on forward too. If they didn't see any smoke for a long time, they knew that those crossing had been blown into the river by strong winds. After three days travel, they had to traverse the great snow mountain. The cliff faces rose vertically around them and there was nowhere for their feet to find solid purchase. The stone wall's surface was covered with holes for pegs arranged by former (travelers) in a systematic way. Each man was equipped with four pegs (*yi*). First, he retrieved the lower peg, then grasping the peg above him with his hand, lifted himself along the wall, repeating this over and over. It took a whole day to cross this section when our feet finally returned to flat ground and we

of the Free University of Berlin for their interest in Dharmodgata which served to drive this paper toward completion.

⁴⁸. From the *Gaosengzhuan* 高僧傳 by Huijiao 慧皎 T50, 338b–339a: 釋曇無竭, 此云法勇。姓李, 幽州黃龍人也。幼為沙彌便修苦行, 持戒誦經, 為師僧所重。嘗聞法顯等躬踐佛國, 乃慨然有忘身之誓。遂以宋永初元年招集同志沙門僧猛、曇朗之徒二十五人, 共齎幡蓋供養之具, 發跡北土遠適西方。初至河南國, 仍出海西郡, 進入流沙到高昌郡。經歷龜茲、沙勒諸國, 登葱嶺、度雪山。障氣千重, 層冰萬里。下有大江, 流急若箭, 於東西兩山之脇繫索為橋, 十人一過, 到彼岸已, 舉煙為幟。後人見煙, 知前已度, 方得更進。若久不見煙, 則知暴風吹索人墮江中。行經三日, 復過大雪山。懸崖壁立無安足處。石壁皆有故杙孔, 處處相對。人各執四杙, 先拔下杙, 手攀上杙, 展轉相攀。經日方過, 及到平地, 相待料檢, 同侶失十二人。進至罽賓國, 禮拜佛鉢。停歲餘, 學梵書梵語。求得觀世音受記經梵文一部。復西行至辛頭那提河, 漢言師子曰。緣河西入月氏國, 禮拜佛肉髻骨及觀自沸木魴。後至檀特山南石留寺, 住僧三百餘人, 雜三乘學。無竭停此寺受大戒。天竺禪師佛馱多羅, 此云覺救, 彼土咸云已證果, 無竭請為和上。漢沙門志定為阿闍梨。停夏坐三月日。復行向中天竺。界路既空曠, 唯齎石蜜為糧。同侶尚有十三人, 八人於路並化, 餘五人同行。無竭雖屢經危棘, 而繫念所齎觀世音經, 未嘗暫廢。將至舍衛國, 野中逢山象一群。無竭稱名歸命, 即有師子從林中出, 象驚惶奔走。後渡恒河, 復值野牛一群鳴吼而來, 將欲害人。無竭歸命如初, 尋有大鷲飛來, 野牛驚散, 遂得免之。其誠心所感在險剋濟, 皆此類也。後於南天竺隨舶汎海達廣州。所歷事迹別有記傳。其所譯出觀世音受記經, 今傳于京師。後不知所終。

⁴⁹. The kingdom Henan 河南國 was the centre of the West-Qin 西秦 established by the ethnic group Qifu-Xianbei 乞伏鮮卑 (385–431).

⁵⁰. Read Xihai-Jun 西海郡 alias Juyan 居延 established during the Han dynasty.

waited for the others to arrive so as to count our numbers: twelve of our group had perished.

Arriving in the kingdom Jibin 罽賓國, (Dharmodgata) worshipped Buddha's alms bowl. Here, he stayed for more than one year in order to study Sanskrit language and handwriting. He attained the Sanskrit manuscript of the *Guanshiyin-Shoujijing* 觀世音受記經⁵¹. Then he carried on further westward to the *Xintounati* River⁵² which (*xintou*) means lion in Chinese. Along the river and from the west he entered the kingdom of Rouzhi 月氏 (Kuṣāṇa) where he worshipped Buddha's topknot (*uṣṇīṣa*). Next to the Shiliu Monastery 石留寺 south of Tante Mountain 檀特山 where over three hundred monks lived, and the teachings of the three factions⁵³ had been learned together. Dharmodgata received monk's full ordination (*upasampadā*) at this temple. The Indian Master Buddhahadra 佛駄多羅, whose name means "liberation through being awakened" 覺救 in Chinese. In India, all people say that he had already attained the fruits of enlightenment (*abhisambuddha*), therefore Dharmodgata requested him (Buddhahadra) to be his instructor (*upādhyāya*), and the Chinese monks Zhiding 志定 became his supervisor (*āchārya*).

They stayed at this monastery as residence during the rainy season (*varṣā*) for three months. Afterwards they travelled toward Central India. The borderland on the way was sparsely populated, so there was only jaggary for food. Of the thirteen monks walking together, eight died, leaving only five remaining. Despite the constant dangers they were met with, Dharmodgata always thought of the Avalokiteśvara-Sūtra he was holding and never gave up his goal. Just before arrival in the kingdom of Śrāvastī, their advance through the wilderness was blocked by a pack of mountain elephants. Dharmodgata called Buddha's name taking refuge in him and out from the forest emerged instantly a lion to chase the elephants away. Afterwards, they crossed the Gaṅgā River 恒河, where a bevy of wild cows charged toward them making loud noises as if they wanted to harm the travellers. Dharmodgata invoked Buddha's name once more and a great vulture swept down frightening the wild cows away. Again, they avoided another danger. There has always been a similar situation that he touched the (Buddhas) with his devoutness so that he could be saved despite the danger. Finally, Dharmodgata boarded a ship in southern India to sail back to Guangzhou. There is a separate report on his travel experiences. His translation of the *Guanshiyin-Shoujijing* is still circulated in the capital. It is unknown when and where he died later on.⁵⁴

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⁵¹. **Avalokiteśvara-Vyākaraṇa-Sūtra* [Sūtra of Avalokiteśvara's Prediction].

⁵². 辛頭那提 probably refers to Sindhu-nadī alias Indus.

⁵³. These are *śrāvaka*-, *pratyekabuddha*-, and *bodhisattva-yāna*.

⁵⁴. For the French translation see Shih 1968: 116f.

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